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# *Parents and Teachers*

## *Together At Last?*

**A Discussion on Successful Parental Involvement  
in Education at the Secondary Level**



*"Parents can be the teacher's greatest allies,  
and when invited to become involved,  
they tend to become allies" (Rotter, 1987, p. 7)*

- ▶ Essential Questions
- ▶ History of the Parent-Teacher Connection
- ▶ What It Looks Like Today
- ▶ Benefits of Effective Communication
- ▶ Barriers to Effective Communication
  - ▶ for educators
  - ▶ for parents
  - ▶ Over-Involvement?
  - ▶ at the secondary level
- ▶ Solutions
- ▶ Issues with Special Education
- ▶ Reflection on Current Practices



# Points to Ponder



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- When should communication start? Who participates?
- Who should initiate contact with whom? By what methods and under what conditions?
- How much and what quality of communication is optimal?
- What are barriers to successful parental involvement? What are specific barriers at the secondary level?
- What are solutions to help improve parental involvement at the secondary level?
- What are some ways in which educators can improve relationships with parents?





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# *History Lesson:*

## *Parental Involvement in Schooling Over the Years*



# Timeline:

## 500 BCE to 1920s

(Berger, 2008, pp. 85-126)

- 6th century BCE: Athenian parents taught sons to read, write and swim; further education was given by state-regulated schools. Plato believed parents needed to be taught so that they didn't incorrectly teach their children.
- 150 BCE: Romans began using tutors and schoolteachers, rather than educating their own children.
- 400-1400 CE (Middle Ages): Common people had no formal education; parents taught survival skills, religion, and customs. Nobility was taught in the home till age 7, then received formal education in reading, writing, arithmetic, and land and household management.
- 1500s CE: Martin Luther initiates protestant reformation and encourages parents to teach children to read (the Bible), morals, and catechisms.
- mid-1700s CE: Johann Pestilozzi creates the first book for parent educators: *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*.
- early 1800s CE: Friedrich Froebel, father of kindergarten, writes *Mother Play and Nursery Songs with Finger Play*, which reinforces his belief that mothers work with educators to teach their children developmentally appropriate material.



# Timeline:

## 1800s to 1965

(Berger, 2008, pp. 85-126)

- mid-1800s CE: Henry Barnard and Elizabeth Peabody establish kindergarten in the U.S. and promote Froebel's belief in unity of parents and formal schooling.
- 1910 to 1930 CE: Parents are expected to demand obedience and to schedule activities of their children (even infants) strictly.
- 1916-1920s CE: Parent cooperatives are established in 6 locations in U.S. (high quality education for children, but parents share responsibilities)
- 1930s CE: Parent Teacher Association (PTA) membership grows to 1.5 million!
- 1930 CE: White House Conference on Child Health and Protection recommends parent education as part of the public school system
- 1946 CE: Benjamin Spock publishes *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*; he redirects efforts from discipline and scheduling to enjoyment.
- 1965 CE: Head Start is begun as part of the War on Poverty; inherent is the belief that early parental involvement is directly related to academic success.



# Timeline:

## 1965 to Present Day

(Berger, 2008, pp. 85-126)

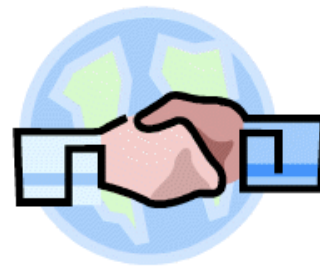
- 1965 CE: Elementary and Secondary Education Act is passed; provides funds to involve parents in improving education for low SES children.
- 1980s CE: Financial difficulties and feminist movement result in households with 2 working parents; less time to educate/be involved at home.
- 1990s CE: “Focus on the Family” movement begins, with the Department of Education issuing *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnership for Learning* (1994). Charter schools begin to give parents more choice.
- 21st century CE: U.S. Department of Education creates Partnerships for Family Involvement in Education. The National Education Goals Panel identifies goals 1 and 8: “All children ready to learn” and “Parental involvement.”



# What Parent Involvement Looks Like Today

- ▶ Direct Teacher-Parent Contact
  - ▶ Teacher Communication about Positive Achievement
  - ▶ Pro-Active Discussions to Prevent Failure
  - ▶ Regular Updates about Graduation Progress
- ▶ Attendance at Open Houses or Other School Events
- ▶ Student-Led or Parent-Teacher Conferences
- ▶ Parental Reinforcement and Encouragement of School Practices
- ▶ Parent Volunteerism in Schools
- ▶ Parent Participation in Leadership Groups in School/District





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# *Why Create Conversation?*

*Benefits of Parent-Teacher  
Communication*

It's the ethical thing to do!



"Home-school relationships --  
the informal and formal  
connections between family and  
school -- are just as  
important for adolescents as  
they are for younger children"

(Bouffard, N. & Stephen, N., 2007, p. 1).



# Research Says, "It Works!"

- ▶ Increased student academic performance
- ▶ Better student adjustment across transitions (ex. middle to high school)
- ▶ Teacher learns student interests for tailoring lessons to increase motivation
- ▶ Higher aspirations for students
- ▶ Lower student drop-out rates
- ▶ Decreased negative stereotypes between parents/teachers
- ▶ Increased familiarity with high school requirements and college-prep increase likelihood for students to attend college
- ▶ Aligned values=coherence



# More Merits...

- ▶ Better student behavior
- ▶ Positive parental self-worth
- ▶ Parental feeling of control over situation
- ▶ Improved academic and social programs
- ▶ Low-income students may gain more when parents become involved
- ▶ Increased student attendance
- ▶ Better placement and individual instruction for specific students
- ▶ Improved teacher morale and confidence due to parental support of methods/curricula



# And Philosophically, It's Sound

- ▶ Martin Buber and Soren Kierkegaard: Existentialism in terms of human connection and trust
- ▶ Nel Noddings: Ethic of care (and relationships)
- ▶ John Dewey: Progressivism emphasizes relevance to student



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# *Barriers to Effective Communication*

*Why It Doesn't Always Work*



# Barriers for Educators

- Dwelling on negative stereotypes or judgments about the families
  - The belief that the parents don't care – usually connected to low socioeconomic conditions
  - Parents Labeled as “Problem Parents” or “Hard to Reach Parents”
  - Using the families' problems to explain student's performance in school
- Fear of Conflict
  - Fear of facing the “wrath” of a frustrated parent
  - Fear that the parent will blame the teacher
  - Guilt of the teacher
  - Resentment from the student - long-term effects.
  - Young teacher issues



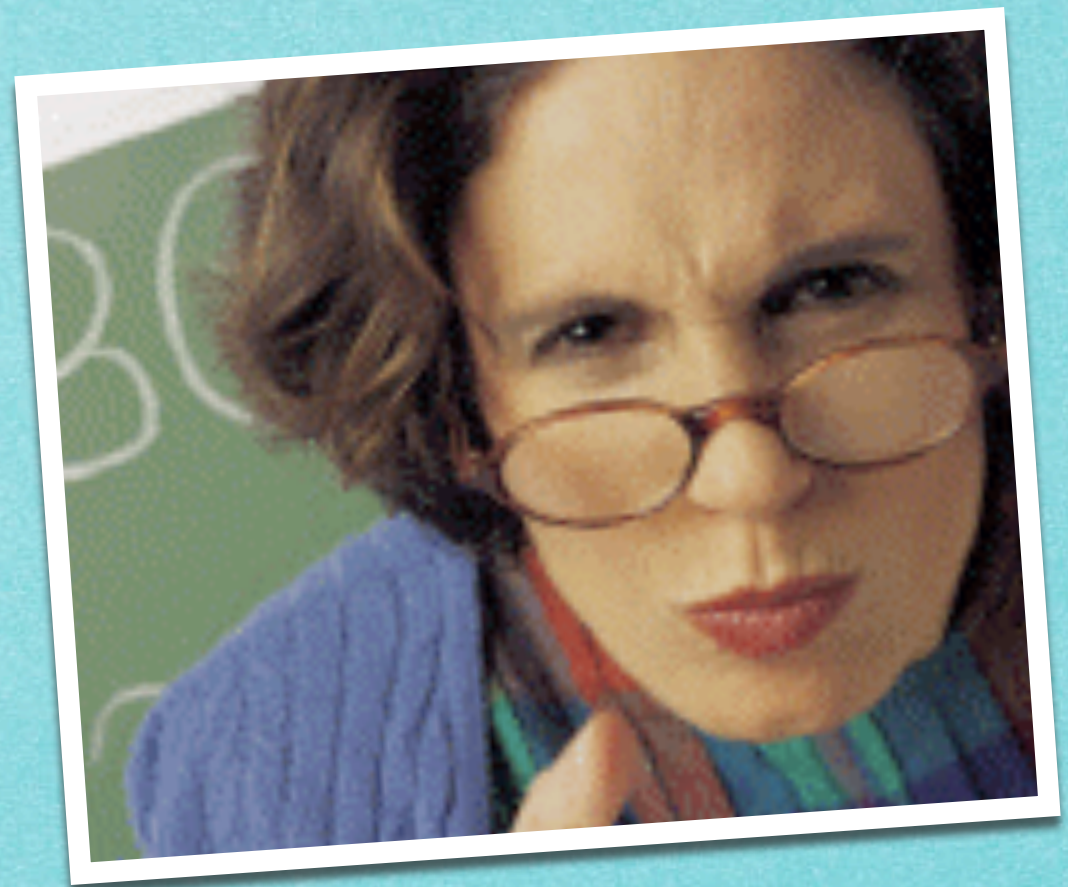
# Educator Issues, continued...

- Doubts about the Family's Ability to Fix the Problems
  - Connected to negative stereotypes about the family
  - Teacher belief: "If I cannot fix it, how can they?"
- Lack of Proper Training
  - Some teachers are lacking proper training needed for positive interaction.
  - Proper communication skills
- Time and Funding Restraints
  - So busy with initiatives – when would teachers have time?
  - Lack of funds for proper training for parent interaction
  - Lack of funding available to develop a successful parent program
- High School Restrictions
  - Too many students to closely monitor
  - Communication is usually connected to failure and behavior.



# In Focus: The Parent Perspective

- ▶ Conferencing from the Parent's Point of View



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# Barriers for Parents

- Feelings of Inadequacies
  - Past experience in schools
  - Fear that they are failing as a parent
  - Personal issues of the family
  - Educational levels of the parents
- Passive Role
  - Some parents feel education should be left to schools.
  - Some parents believe that schools will contact parents if there is a problem.
- Cultural and Linguistics Differences of the Parents
  - Schools are usually composed of the Caucasian, middle class, and educated society.
  - Schools are generally English speaking facilities.



# Parental Problems, continued...

- Financial and Time Restraints
  - Work schedules of parents do not always allow time for parents to be involved or attend meetings.
  - Some families (particularly lower income or single parents) work more than one job.
  - No access to transportation
- Schools May Not Feel Welcoming to Parents
  - Lack of communication about school events
  - Parents usually contacted only during times of crisis
  - Sometimes connected to previous experience in school
  - Distrust of the teacher



# Conferencing Concerns

Parent-teacher conferences are particularly problematic:

- defensive parents
- students involved
- communication difficulties

Two basic forms of communication: formal and informal

- Formal include: open house, parent-teacher (sometimes student) conferences

- Informal include: e-mails, phone-calls, newsletters, local access t.v., volunteering groups, websites



# Traditional Conferences

## Formal communication:

- Traditional parent-teacher conferences

## Parent Responses:

“Almost without exception, the parents interviewed in this study found parents' evenings a frustrating experience; and for many deeply distressing. These were emotive occasions for them: the one event of the year where they had a chance to discuss what was, for them, a subject of consuming interest – their child's school performance and, by extension, their future. Yet most parents felt relatively powerless in the exchange. Their own child was all-important to them, yet they knew that for the teacher he/she was just one among many. They felt a need to 'make the case' for their child – a case they often felt they lost.”

(Walker, 1998, p. 163)



# Traditional Conferences

**This study considered the parent-teacher conference in which parents had 10 minutes with each of their child's teachers and found the following contributory to the frustration felt by parents:**

- **confusion as to its purpose,**
- **time constraints,**
- **judgement in communication,**
- **conflict in agendas,**
- **student omitted from process,**
- **and power imbalances**



# Student-Led Conferences

## Parents' Reflections

Parents, who were not privy to the intense practice and preparation for the conferences, were the most awed by them. An overwhelming **96% responded affirmatively to the statement, "Student-led conferences will help me as a parent to facilitate my child's success in middle school."**

Parents said that the conferences enabled them to be active partners in their children's academic growth. One parent gushed, **"The parent conference was wonderful. I loved it. I felt Ms. Shepard, [my daughter], and I were in complete partnership, working together to better her education. It was positive and uplifting. Thank you, thank you, thank you."**

Parents also recognized that the process of self-assessment helped students to learn and grow. The following comment from a parent illustrates the transference of responsibility for learning to the student: **"What I liked about the conference was that it made my son critically evaluate the teacher narratives and placed on him the responsibility for addressing the concerns raised. He seemed to take ownership of the solutions he and his adviser developed."**

(Shulkind, 2008, pp. 54-58)



# SLC Pro's and Con's

Parents felt that student-led conferences indicated the following:

- clearer purpose,
- time is flexible and extended,
- communication is felt to be less judgmental,
- reduced conflict in agendas,
- student is included and pivotal in the process,
- power resides more in the student and parent

But some also expressed concern:

- they "talk to their kids all the time"
- they "aren't learning anything new"
- so it's a "waste of their time"

(especially true when little or no training is provided as to the conference's process or purpose)



# Informal Communication

**At secondary level, fewer opportunities for meaningful informal communication:**

- **caregivers return to work**
- **parents limit involvement b/c they feel students want them to**
- **students expected to assume greater responsibility**

“Parents reported that the...most effective strategies are those that involve personal contact. One of the most effective ways to communicate information, to nurture a caring environment, to gain parent's trust, and to overcome parental fears...is the use of personal communication by school staff.”



# Positive Informal Communication

**Reported positive interchanges include:**

- **being invited to join a committee**
- **contribute a talent to the school**
- **provide assistance during an event**
- **attend a meeting**
- **speaking to them individually on campus**
- **welcoming and appropriate body language and demeanor**
- **invited to collaborate on child's learning**
- **demonstration of respect**

(Young, 1995)



# Parents' Purposes

## Rational:

- for their children to have great teachers who will care about them, develop real relationships with them, and contribute to their future success
- to have their child be part of a moral community with a coherent mission

## Irrational:

- to have teachers and administrators approve of their parenting
- to have teachers regard them as full partners in educating their child
- to have administrators provide special accommodations for their child
- to have the school watch over their children continuously, and report on them exhaustively, while also paradoxically nurturing in them the independence and initiative needed for future success and fulfillment.

(McLaren, A., & Schweizer, L., 2009)



# How Much is Too Much?



(Microsoft Office Online, 2009)

Issues of  
Over-Involvement  
in Parent-Teacher  
Communication



# "Helicopter" Parents

**"Perhaps you know it by its other names: helicoptering, smothering mothering, alpha parenting, child-centered parenting. Or maybe there's a description you've coined on your own but kept to yourself: Overly enmeshed parenting? Get-them-into-Harvard-or-bust parenting? My-own-mother-never-breast-fed-me-so-I-am-never-going-to-let-my-kid-out-of-my-sight parenting?" (Belkin, 2009).**

- Numerous articles on over-involved parenting at the college level and how to deal with it. Less so in high school.
- Dependent on the school climate/culture and expectations for students



# Over-Involvement = Over-Dependency

## May involve:

- ✂• over-scheduling of child
- ✂• advocating for the student beyond normal parent-teacher contact
- ✂• pushing students and teachers for grades or test scores
- ✂• putting extreme pressure on child to succeed
- ✂• excuse unnecessary absences
- ✂• fighting disciplinary actions at school

## Problems can result:

- ✂• “Growth Mindset” diminished (Bassett, 2009)
- ✂• Parent-teacher conflicts arise
- ✂• Child caught in center of unwanted attention
- ✂• Child exhausted by extensive schedule
- ✂• Child loses opportunity to think and advocate for self (Hoffman, 2001).



# The Flip Side

- ▶ “The College Board and the Art & Science Group found that almost 30 percent of college-bound seniors surveyed wished their parents did more to help them look for and apply to colleges. Only 6 percent wanted their parents to do less” (CollegeBoard, 2009).
- ▶ Possible correlation between high school students and college students? “Data from 24 colleges and universities gathered for the National Survey of Student Engagement show that students whose parents were very often in contact with them and frequently intervened on their behalf "reported higher levels of engagement and more frequent use of deep learning activities," such as after-class discussions with professors, intensive writing exercises and independent research, than students with less-involved parents” (Mathews, 2007).
- ▶ Are you a helicopter parent? Take the quiz! <http://www.collegeboard.com/parents/plan/getting-ready/155044.html>



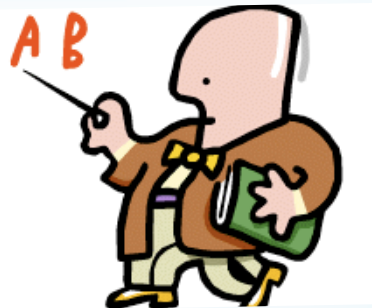
# Why the High School Hurts Most

- Students finding their own identities
  - Students are in a challenging time of their life – encouraged to take more responsibility for problems
  - Students do not want their parents involved at school
- Schedule and Format of High School
  - Different teachers per subject
  - Student to teacher ratio
  - Schedule of the school day – knowing when are the teachers available



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(Microsoft Office Online, 2009)

# *So What Do We Do?*

## *Possible Solutions to Creating Effective Communication*

How Educators Can Make a Difference



"There is an ongoing process to identify and constructive suggestions for improvement in the family-school interface rather than assigning blame. . . it suggests that barriers are expected for all and the emphasis must be on understanding and removing them" (Christenson, 2001, p. 75).



# Solutions for Educators at All Levels

1. Identify the needs and appropriate form of communication for parental involvement (see handout).
2. Become educated on the benefits of parental involvement in the schooling process (and keep this in mind).
3. Be mindful of your judgments about a family's situation.
4. Be wary of teacher room gossip about your students. Talk is good, but keep it centered on the student's education.
5. If available, receive proper training on effective communication skills and running parent teacher conferences.
6. Make a commitment to work with parents from the beginning of the year. It is estimated that one-third of the problems can be handled without complications if communication is made before the problem escalates (Rotter, 1987, p. 6). Make contact at the first sign of trouble.



# All Level Solutions, continued...

7. Create an atmosphere of communication and trust. Keep parents informed as much as possible.
8. Use personable forms of communication. For example, personal emails, phone calls, face-to-face conversations.
9. Create parent support groups to assist parents.
10. Make the time to communicate with parents – it is worth it in the end.
11. Be prepared for meetings. (See handout)
12. Be willing to ask for help.
13. Treat parents as partners in the schooling process.
14. Have parent functions early in the school year so that parents have the opportunity to get to know the teachers.



# And in Secondary Schools:

1. Use a team approach for solutions and communicate with other teachers about a student's needs. Students tend to have the same problem in all classes.
2. Within this team approach, have one teacher who keeps in regular contact with parents.
3. Use other resources within your school. For example, the school guidance and school nurses to help you with your students.
4. Have teachers plan teaching units that involve the parents in the work.
5. Create a newsletter to be sent home. Use of the Internet is great but may not be accessible by all families.



# Resources for Increasing Effective Parental Involvement

- ▶ **Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS):** a homework process created by the National Network of Partner Schools at Johns Hopkins, which gets students to communicate their learning with parents: [www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/TIPSmmain.htm](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/tips/TIPSmmain.htm)
- ▶ **Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP)** is dedicated to improving education for disadvantaged youth by encouraging a variety of levels of support for students: [www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org)
- ▶ **Family Involvement of Network Educators (FINE)** is free to join and offers a monthly newsletter with ideas on how to create positive relationships between parents, communities, and teachers: [www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/joinfine.html)



# In Focus: Parental Involvement



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## in Special Education



# I.D.E.A. 2004

- ▶ Requires all reasonable attempts to have a parent present at IEP meeting
- ▶ Requires the meeting to be set in a reasonable time
- ▶ Requires an interpreter if the parents native language is not English
- ▶ Requires parents to be participants in the development and implementation of the IEP



# IEP issues:

## **Parents' Feelings About Special Education**

- Not listened to
- Outside IEP decisions

## **Difficulties of the IEP Meeting in Rural Towns**

- Travel for the parents
- Travel for other IEP members
- Lack of Adequate Resources

## **Barriers for Parental Involvement and Special Education**

- Do not share a common vocabulary
- Parents available at "odd" times
- Educators take over the meeting
- Hereditary causes
- Unclear roles



# Solutions for SPED

## Parents

- Do their homework
- Become organized

## Teachers

- Recommend literature for special education parents
- IEP meetings
- Informational Sessions



# What About You?



*Reflecting on Current Practices*

*Personal and School/District-Wide*



# Questions to Consider

- Do you communicate with parents with a shared vocabulary (avoiding jargon)?
- Is your communication frequent and timely?
- Do you prepare for your parent conferences in advance?
- Are you aware of your body language?
- How can you setup your room or school to make it more inviting?
- Do you use technology or newsletters to communicate information?
- Do open houses and other invitational events occur early in the school year?
- Do you ask your parents for input or help in devising or teaching curricula?
- Do you already have fixed notions about certain families? How can you avoid such prejudices?
- Do you offer positive reports of student success as well as concerns?



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# Credits

- *Jennifer Baker: Timeline, Parent Involvement Today, Benefits of Effective Communication, Over-Involved Parents, Web Resources, Keynote Presentation Assembly*
- *Heather Ross: Barriers for Educators, Barriers for Parents, Secondary School Concerns, Solutions for All Levels, Solutions for High School*
- *Megan Packard: In Focus: Issues in Special Education*
- *Bethany Dorian: The Parent Perspective, and Parent-Teacher Conferences*